



Coaches Can Read, Too: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A FOOTBALL COACHING DISCOURSE COMMUNITY

SEAN BRANICK

Framing the Reading

Sean Branick was a first-year student in Elizabeth Wardle's composition class at the University of Dayton when he wrote this paper. He was enrolled in a special pilot two-semester composition sequence that allowed him to work on this ethnography for a full academic year. His paper was chosen as one of the best from two such courses and published in a one-time-only university publication called *Looking for Literacy: Reporting the Research*. Branick's interest in the discourse community of football coaches arose from his own experience as a high school football player and as a student coach in college. He later served as a student football coach at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, a defensive line intern at Ohio State University, and is now student teaching.

We are including Branick's paper here because he applies Swales's concept of discourse community to a community that many people do not immediately think of as including literacy: football. He begins by explaining the characteristics of effective football coaches, and then explains in detail why he believes that coaches do constitute a discourse community. But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to identify some special "literacies" that he believes effective coaches possess.

Getting Ready to Read

Before you read, do the following activity:

- Ask yourself whether you agree that football coaches constitute a discourse community according to Swales's definition.

As you read, consider the following question:

- In his introduction, Branick includes the three "moves" that Swales identifies in his CARS model of research introductions (see pp. 12–15)—establishing the territory, establishing a niche, and explaining how he will fill that niche. Can you identify where Branick makes those moves?

The profession of coaching football is one of the most influential professions that exists in today's world. It is a profession essential to the game whether it is a third-grade team or a pro team. Coaches may range from

parents volunteer every waking hour and legends of the profession that of the coach is otherwise achieved the public yet looked that focused coaching coaches.

Goal-Focused

Whether on the field, the coach used the process to achieve his goal is often the focus. Anthony Grant, a coach, effectively setting the goal how the coach consists of the first step begins action, motivation, reflection), evaluation on this evaluation and thus reach his goal.

Grant explains that coaching concept is the player set goal realistically achieving the relationship between the coach to develop an honest growth where the coach. The third step the athlete development is managing process athlete accountability is achieving the goal.

Characteristics

While successful coaches have many characteristics, certain personal qualities are essential for success in the coaching profession. Five specific qualities of a good coach are: 1. The coach is a good teacher. This is important because the coach is responsible for teaching the players about the game and the rules.

The second quality is that the coach is a good listener. The coach should be able to listen to the players and understand their needs and concerns.

parents volunteering with a child's youth program to people who dedicate every waking hour to the game. Coaches are made up of both everyday Joes and legends that will live in memory as long as the game is played. It is a profession that requires putting the athletes first: "The main responsibility of the coach is to enable their athletes to attain levels of performance not otherwise achievable" (Short "Role," S29). It is a profession very visible to the public yet it has many behind-the-scenes factors that may be often overlooked that directly relate to success. Among these are the idea of goal-focused coaching, coaching with confidence, and the characteristics of effective coaches.

Goal-Focused Coaching

Whether on the football field or off the football field, people have always used the process of setting and chasing goals to achieve a desired outcome. A goal is often the universal starting point in many things, including football. Anthony Grant, a sport psychologist, takes an in-depth look at the process of effectively setting a goal in order to achieve a desired result. He talks about how the coach should help facilitate the entire process of using goals, which consists of the following: "an individual sets a goal, develops a plan of action, begins action, monitors his or her performance (through observation and self-reflection), evaluates his or her performance (thus gaining insight) and, based on this evaluation, changes his or her actions to further enhance performance, and thus reach his or her goal" (751).

Grant explains that there are five important parts to this goal-focused coaching concept. The first part is setting good goals. The coach must help the player set goals that coincide with his values, are well defined, and are realistically achievable. The second part is developing a strong working relationship between the coach and player. This means that a coach must work to develop an honest relationship to help create an environment conducive to growth where the player will feel comfortable being open and honest with the coach. The third aspect is developing a solution focus, which means helping the athlete develop solutions to help him achieve his goals. The fourth part is managing process. This includes developing actions steps and holding the athlete accountable for completing the agreed steps. The fifth and final aspect is achieving the desired outcome.

Characteristics of an Effective Coach

While successful coaches have been exposed to the spotlight throughout history, certain personal qualities of these coaches have emerged as essential to success in the coaching business. Sports psychologist Sandra Short explores five specific qualities of effective coaches. The first of these qualities is being a teacher. This is important because coaches must be able to teach their players about the game and what to do during competition.

The second quality is being organized. Being organized is typically a behind-the-scenes job but it is important because a coach must be organized

to keep track of players, competitions, and practice schedules. It is important to organize a plan for success and be able to stick to it. Coaches in team sports must be organized before stepping onto the playing field so that they will know how to handle specific situations such as substitutions and timeout management.

The third quality is being competitive. Coaches must have an inner desire to compete and work to instill that desire to compete in their athletes. Being competitive must be a foundational quality in athletes. It doesn't matter how gifted an athlete is or how much he knows, if he does not have the desire to compete then he will not be successful.

The fourth quality is being a learner. Coaches must continue to learn every day they are on the job. They must learn about their players' personality and they must learn about the newest trends, philosophies, and strategies in the sport that they coach.

The fifth and final quality mentioned is being a friend and mentor. It is important to be a positive role model for their players to look up to. A coach should also offer support and counseling when a player may need it. Fulfilling this role can bring about a deeper level of satisfaction for both the coach and the athlete.

Confidence in Coaching

Another aspect of coaching that has been studied is coaching confidence and its relationship with imagery. Sports psychologist Sandra Short argues that imagining being confident helps increase real confidence and the feeling of effectiveness. During pregame preparations, if a coach pictures himself as a confident, successful coach, he is more likely to exude real confidence.

Another point Short made is that coaches who use imagery to put together game plans feel more comfortable with the plans that they come up with. Coaches who make their plans and play out the game using their imaginations are more likely to see strengths and weaknesses in their plans and adjust their plans accordingly.

A third point made is that coaches who imagine in a "cognitive specific way," that is through clear specific examples, will have more confidence in their teaching abilities. In other words, coaches who specifically imagine teaching skills and techniques will acquire confidence in teaching these attributes and therefore be more effective teachers: "The confidence a coach portrays affects the confidence athletes feel . . . The coach acting confident is one of the most effective strategies coaches can use to increase athletes' 'feelings of efficacy'" (Short, "Relationship" 392).

There have been many articles written on the X's and the O's (specific strategies) of the game. Seminars have been held on the newest strategies. Books have been written on the characteristics of good coaches. Studies have been done on confidence in coaching, the method of setting goals, and the role of the coach in coach-athlete relationships; however scholars have yet to study

a coach's ability to help people may be a part of coaching. However, it gives an understanding beyond individual modes of coaching (146). He talks about how to help them as well.

This idea of coaching is well. Coaches must know how to teach that they can teach how to read and how to play many plays have to teach the players to call the best.

Coaching as a football coach is teaching their players to achieve a positive end result? the coaches at the game.

Methods

I recorded football speeches and interviews with graduate assistants of the pregame press conference. In the pregame press conference to bring out the Whilding, the offensive head coach of the head coach of the interview took place. Painter, the graduate assistant of the winter as well. In the Dayton coach of the questions about the coach also about the coach.

I used these methods to study the coaches were interviewed. The interviews included teaching philosophies of the coaches and the players and the coaches reflective of Tony.

a coach's ability to read his players and the game as a form of literacy. Many people may think that literacy is not part of the responsibilities that go with coaching. However, they couldn't be farther from the truth. Tony Mirabelli gives an unorthodox definition of literacy, arguing that "Literacy extends beyond individual experiences of reading and writing to include the various modes of communication and situations of any socially meaningful group" (146). He talks about reading people and knowing when to do something to help them as forms of literacy.

This idea of multiple literacies can be applied to football coaching staff as well. Coaches need to be able to do so much more than just read. They need to know how to read people. They need to know how to read their players so that they can find out how to get the most out of them. They must also know how to read and teach the plays. The coaches must know their plays because many plays have certain "reads" or "progressions" that the coach must be able to teach the players. Coaches also must be able to read the game so that they can call the best plays that suit certain situations properly.

Coaching as a complex literacy practice has not been examined. How do football coaches, as members of a specific discourse community, go about reading their players and the game in order to get optimal performance and a positive end result? To figure this out, I conducted an ethnographic study on how the coaches at the University of Dayton go about reading people and reading the game.

Methods

I recorded football coaches at the University of Dayton during their pregame speeches and interviewed those coaches afterwards; I also interviewed a coaching graduate assistant at the University of Cincinnati via email. The recording of the pregame speeches took place before a home game on a Saturday afternoon. In the pregame speeches, Coach Kelly and Coach Whilding attempted to bring out the best in their players. I conducted an interview with Coach Whilding, the offensive coordinator, the following week, and with Coach Kelly, the head coach at the time, during the winter of the following season. Each interview took place in the coaches' offices. The email interview with Coach Painter, the graduate assistant at the University of Cincinnati, took place in the winter as well. In it, I asked similar questions to those used for the University of Dayton coaches. (Interview questions are attached as Appendix A.) I asked questions about how coaches go about reading their players and the game and also about the coach's personal history and motivation for coaching.

I used these methods because they allowed me to take a direct look at what the coaches were saying and then get a look at the thought process behind it. The interviews involved open-ended questions that helped bring out coaching philosophies on many different issues, including the issue of reading their players and the game. This idea of reading players and the game is directly reflective of Tony Mirabelli's idea of multiple literacies.

I analyzed the data collected by applying John Swales's six characteristics of a discourse community. The characteristics I focused on are the set of common goals, the genres, and the specific lexis used.

Results

Because we are studying the multiple literacies of football coaches by looking at coaching as a discourse community, it will be clearest to separate the results for the characteristics of a discourse community and the results for multiple literacies.

Characteristics of a Discourse Community

A football coaching staff is an excellent example of a discourse community. The characteristics are clearly defined and easy to recognize. The clearest characteristics to pick up on are the goals, lexis, and genres.

Goals. Coach Kelly and Coach Whilding helped make up one of the most successful coaching staffs in the history of division 1 college football. This is mainly due to their ability to set and achieve goals, both team and personal goals. There is always the goal of winning the game. The University of Dayton had goal charts with a list of about 10 goals for every game, for offense, defense, and special teams. They use these charts with stickers to help monitor how well they achieve these goals and figure out the goals they need to work on.

Coaches also have many individual goals. Many of these goals include getting the most out of their players physically and mentally. Coaches always strive to make their players push themselves to heights that they never thought they could reach. Coaches also have the goal of seeing their players develop as people. Coach Whilding talked about how he enjoyed seeing his players succeed in real-life situations after football: "It's good to see those guys mature and go on and get good jobs and raise families and be very responsible people in their communities."

Along with these goals, there are many rewards. While many big time college coaches may receive a hefty paycheck, Coach Whilding explained that some of the rewards are not monetary: "I know guys who just hate to get up in the morning and hate to go to work, and I have just never felt that way."

Lexis. Another important characteristic of discourse communities is that there is a specialized lexis, or set of terms that is unique to the community. There are many terms that are involved in football coaching communities that may not make sense to most people but, among a team, make perfect sense and help the community better do its work and achieve its goals.

Some of the more common terms might make more sense to the public, such as touchdown or tackle. There are, however, terms that might not make sense to anybody outside the team. Examples of these may be passing routes such as "Y corner," "Follow," or "Green Gold." They could also be things like blocking

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Multiple Literacies

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schemes such as "Bob," "Sam," or "Combo." There are terms for everything, and it takes many repetitions during practice to learn all of this lexis. The lexis helps save time because one word may describe several actions. This lexis is also important because the lexis varies from team to team, so if the opposing team hears it, they will not know what it means. Without many hours spent preparing and practicing, the players and the coaches would not have this advantage in communication.

Genres. A genre is a text that helps facilitate communication between people, and in this example all communication takes place within the discourse community. There are certain genres that help a football team and football coaching staff operate efficiently. Genres often use the unique lexis that was previously mentioned.

Perhaps the most essential genre is the playbook. The playbook is created by the coaches and shows all the plays that they plan on running and the proper way that the players are supposed to run them. The players get the playbooks at the beginning of the season and need to learn the plays before they are "installed" during practice. The players must guard these books and make sure that no members from opposing teams get the information. The playbook is essential to success because there are many plays and without a playbook the players would become confused and make mistakes that could be disastrous to the outcome of the football game.

Another genre is a scouting report. The scouting report is also made up by the coaches for the players. It shows the other team's personnel, what plays they like to run, and when they like to run them. It helps the players know what to expect going into the game so they can prepare accordingly. The coaches will usually spend the day after a game putting together a scouting report and distribute the report to their players at the beginning of the week.

A third genre is a play-calling sheet. This is made up by the coaches and is only for the coaches, mainly the offensive coordinator. The play-calling sheet helps the coach remember all the plays that they have and what situation that the plays are favorable in. Without a play-calling sheet, the coach would have to remember the names of all the plays on his own, and that is something that could be a distraction to calling the proper plays, and could effectively cost a team a game.

Now that we understand what exactly a football coaching discourse community is and what it is made up of, we can learn exactly how the concept of literacy applies to this group.

Multiple Literacies

Many people do not see the concept of literacy as something that would apply to a football coaching staff. However, Mirabelli defines literacy as not just reading and writing but things such as reading people. He uses the example of a waiter reading his customers in his article. This same idea can be applied to a football coaching discourse community.

Interpersonal Literacies

One of the literacies for a football coach is the ability to read the players. This can be described as an interpersonal literacy. There are two types of reading the coach needs to do. First, coaches must be able to read players to know when they are ready to play; second, coaches must be able to read their players to know how to motivate them properly to get the most out of them.

There are different characteristics to look for when it comes to knowing when players are ready to play. Two are comfort and knowledge. Coach Painter from Cincinnati emphasized player comfort: "Knowing their personality is a big part of reading them. When a player is ready to play they will be in a comfortable mode. Whether that is listening to music, jumping around, or even reading, when a player is loose and comfortable they are ready to compete." Coach Kelly emphasized knowledge of the game: "Do they have the knowledge to perform? What we try to do is put them in as many stressful situations as possible from a mental point of view to see if they can handle that in practice. If they can handle that in practice . . . then we cut 'em loose and let 'em play." He went on to state that another way of finding out whether or not a player has that knowledge and is ready to play is by sitting down one on one with him. Coach Kelly elaborates, "I can get a good feel for a young man when I'm sitting in a room with him, watching practice or game tape, asking him questions. . . . If there is a lot of hesitation or if they are totally off then I know we're not there yet."

Coaches must be able to read their players in order to motivate them properly. Every coach emphasized that each player is unique and will respond to different types of motivation in different ways. This can be done by taking an emotional, fiery approach or a calm and collected approach. Coach Kelly emphasized the importance of motivation, explaining,

That's a key element in becoming a coach. Can they motivate? Can they identify what makes this guy go? Can you hit that button and how fast can you hit that button? The sooner you find that motivational tool the better off you're going to be. You can tell immediately if it works or not.

Finding out what motivates each individual is no easy task, but Coach Whilding explains, "You have to be able to understand 'How do I reach that player . . . that young man?' And there are a lot of ways to do that. Through the years, you figure it out." He went more in depth and explained that you have to be able to reach everybody as an individual player and that there are many types of players: "There are some that like to yell and scream and get excited. There are others who don't play well like that, who are a little quieter and keep it within themselves but are still very motivated." Coach Painter from Cincinnati points out the balance between these two opposing motivational styles: "You have to use both and know when to use them. . . . Too much fire and you will lose the team and its effectiveness. Too much calm and you will lose control over the environment."

These explanations show that reading players to know when they are ready to play and reading players to know how to motivate them are two very

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Situational Literacies

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It is also important to ing and reacting during timeouts, call certain plays such as knowing what type explains that a key aspect get a feel on the field for develop through the year year sometimes, depending nel. What you're good at,

Because coaches don't to be heard by all the players delegate this responsibility ers are allowed a small amount to check us out of plays when he can make such changes give the team a better chance successful.

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difficult parts of the coaching profession. They require balance, patience, and perseverance. Coach Whilding sums it up, saying, sometimes "it just doesn't work and you find out you have to just use another method."

Situational Literacies

A second essential coaching literacy is being able to read a game. The coaches must be able to actively read a game in order to put their players in the best possible situations to attempt to win the game. Reading a game can be broken down into two categories: pregame and in-game.

The week leading up to a game is a week filled with preparation. Preparation is important because it "will allow you the ability to put players in the places they need to be at the times they need to be there to make plays. From there it's out of your hands" (Painter). Coaches study the opposing team in and out and then formulate a game plan. They consolidate this game plan along with information on the opposition into a packet, make copies of the packet, and distribute the copies to the team. This helps players stay on the same page as the coaches and prepare mentally for the game. This mental preparation will make players feel more comfortable as to what to expect during the game: "You do a lot of preparation during the week, getting ready for the week. We watch a lot of tape. You have to have an idea of what their base defense is, what their coverage is going to be, when they're going to blitz, what down they're going to blitz, what are their favorite ones" (Whilding). Coach Kelly elaborated on the importance of preparation by explaining that you have to get a good idea of what the coach likes to do in certain situations and when you feel like you know the opposing coach, it becomes a game of feel: "It's really important to me to know what's going on in that coach's mind" (Kelly).

It is also important to be able to read the game in real time. Ways of reading and reacting during the game may be as simple as knowing when to call timeouts, call certain plays, or make substitutions, or may be more complicated such as knowing what type of halftime adjustments to make. Coach Whilding explains that a key aspect of making these adjustments is that "You have to get a feel on the field for what is working, and I think that's something you develop through the years . . . and it changes from week to week, from year to year sometimes, depending on your personnel. You have to know your personnel. What you're good at, what you're not good at."

Because coaches don't always have the best view and are not in a position to be heard by all the players when they are on the field, sometimes they will delegate this responsibility to their players. Coach Painter explains, "Our players are allowed a small amount of freedom on the fly. We ask our quarterback to check us out of plays when necessary, but we have established what and when he can make such checks." These checks (changing the play at the line) give the team a better chance of calling a play that will be more likely to be successful.

Halftime adjustments are also very important. Sometimes a team will come out in the first half and do something that was not expected or maybe a certain

strategy is not working the way the coach expected it to. The coaches will come together at the end of the half and discuss possible changes that might help the team. They then use halftime to explain these changes and make sure everyone is on the same page. This can turn into a chess match because sometimes one team will adjust to something that another team does, but at the same time the other team changes up what they were doing. Coach Painter explains it best by saying, "Your opponent is going to adjust, if you do not then you will be at a disadvantage. No matter how much preparation you have put in, there are going to be things you did not expect. This is where your on the field adjustments give you the final edge."

Relationship Between Textual, Situational, and Interpersonal Literacies

Coaching functions as a discourse community that uses a variety of complex literacies—textual, interpersonal, and situational. All of these literacies can be seen functioning together in a game situation.

Before the game the coach had to spend time evaluating his players and deciding who was going to play. To do this he used interpersonal literacies. Now fast forward to a game situation. Let's say that the team we are looking at is on offense. While the players are playing the game, there are assistant coaches in the press box watching to see how the defense reacts to what the offense does. They are looking for any keys or tips that could give the offense an advantage. This is an example of situational literacies. The assistant coaches in the press box will then communicate what they see to the coach calling the offense. This process involves using lexis. The coach will then process what the assistant coaches told him and will look at his play-calling sheet and decide what play to run. The play-calling sheet is an example of a genre. He will then tell the quarterback what play to run. The name of the play consists of lexis as well. The quarterback will tell the team the play and then they will line up. The quarterback will then look at the defense and see if anything needs to be changed. This is an example of situational literacies. If he decides to "check" (change) the play based on what he sees in the defense, he will use lexis to do so. The quarterback will then call "hike" (lexis) and the ball will be snapped and the play will be run with the hopes of scoring a touchdown, which is the goal on any given play.

Conclusion

The world of coaching is more complicated than it may seem to the public eye. Whether it is looking at some of the characteristics of a coaching community or looking at the tasks that coaches partake in, such as reading players and the game, there are still many characteristics and responsibilities that are unexplored to those outside of these communities. After looking in depth at some of the behind-the-scenes factors that go into coaching, I hope to have helped increase knowledge on the literacy aspects involved in coaching. I hope this helps spark interest in the connection between literacy and sports. This

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Appendix A: Inter Interpersonal Literac

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Situational Literacies

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connection will now help people have a better sense of empathy with what the coaches are thinking when they make a specific call on the field or partake in an action off the field, and hopefully I have brought people closer to being able to answer the common question asked at any sporting event: "What was that coach thinking?!"

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Appendix A: Interview Questions for Coaches

Interpersonal Literacies

1. How do you tell when a player is ready or not ready to play? Are there specific things that you look for (body language and attitude, etc.) or is it more intuitive?
2. In what ways do you go about motivating your players? Do you prefer a calm or a fiery approach? How did your coaches go about motivating you when you played? Do you feel like you have become an effective motivator?
3. Do you focus more on motivating players during the week or during a pregame speech? When do you think it is more effective? Are there any specific examples that stick out of when you made an attempt to motivate a player and it was either very successful or unsuccessful? If you were unsuccessful how did you change your approach?
4. Would you consider your approach to correcting athletes more of positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement? Do you think that players respond better to one method better than the other? Is it better to correct mistakes publicly or privately? How do the players react to each method?

Situational Literacies

1. What do you feel are the most important factors to reading and calling a game? Do you use any specific methods to help you mediate reading the game (scripting plays, play-calling sheet with specific situations)?

2. Do you put any of this on your players (system of checks or audibles, plays that are run differently depending on the defense's look)?
3. How much of the outcome of a game do you feel is attributed to pregame coaching preparations (game planning, watching film)?
4. How important are in-game decisions such as halftime adjustments, substitutions, and when to gamble on big plays? Do you go with the overall feel of the game or do you look for specific details when it comes to making a game-time decision?

Questions for Discussion and Journaling

1. Before you read, you were asked to consider whether you think football coaches are a discourse community. After reading Branick's paper, have you changed your opinion in any way? If so, what did he say that got you to think differently?
2. Branick's methods include analyzing the coaches' discourse community using Swales's six characteristics. How effectively does he conduct this analysis? What, if anything, would you change or expand, and why?
3. Branick claims, "There have been many articles written on the X's and O's . . . of the game . . . however scholars have yet to study a coach's ability to read his players and the game as a form of literacy" (para. 12). Does Branick convince you that these abilities are, in fact, a form of literacy? Explain why or why not.

Applying and Exploring Ideas

1. Brainstorm some groups that you think might be discourse communities but which, like football coaches, might not immediately come to mind as such.
2. Pick one of the groups you listed in question 1 and try to sketch out quickly, with a partner or by yourself, whether they meet Swales's six characteristics of a discourse community.
3. Listing characteristics of a discourse community is only the first step in a project. The next step is identifying a genuine question about some aspect of the discourse community, as Branick does here. What else would you like to explore about the discourse community you identified in question 2, directly above.



Framing the Research

Elizabeth Wardle is on the faculty of the University of Central Florida. Wardle and she wrote this piece. They taught writing in context—who used the people learned to write helpful lens for thinking appropriate for understanding been using it ever since. *Communication Quarterly* article won the 2006 Communication.

Activity theory, as a theory that sees all as other and the tools [in] Activity theory gives you in new ways, just as all consultants, use the together, which they call how they try to achieve common motives, activities might have happened but also the histories helps you consider what we mentioned in the trying to accomplish the